

atom bombs on the major mongolian cities
or whether we should just hope for a drought.

in fact, i finally took it upon myself to send
that long overdue thank-you note.

i even enclosed a copy of one of my books
of poems, ostensibly as a reciprocation
for the many calendars, but mostly
to demonstrate what a sterling mind i possess.

this december i did not receive a rand calendar.

THE AGE BEFORE ANTIBIOTICS

when i was growing up in the forties
there weren't any immunizations yet
for measles and whooping cough and mumps
and chicken pox, not even for polio.
i didn't get polio, but i got most of the rest.
what made me think of this
is that my kids are home with chicken pox right now,
but they've had shots for all the others,
and they'll probably be back in school in a week.

i was always better in a week too,
but my aunts always prevailed upon my mother
to make me stay home an extra week recuperating
while they took turns taking care of me.
that second week was a bore.
i was an active kid who loved,
if not the confinement of school,
then at least the social and competitive aspects of it.
i suspect the ennui of those second weeks in bed --
the awful daytime radio, the awful reader's digests --
turned me into an early masturbator
and confirmed me as a writer.
i was playing with myself to make the time pass
before there was very much to even get a hold of.

but reading a student's essay the other day
on how she contracted scarlet and rheumatic fever
because a doctor sent her home too soon
from a tonsillectomy,

i remembered that five of my aunts' brother and sisters
had died in a single epidemic week
decades before i was born,

and i realized why i,
the only child of them all,

was kept home that second week.

OLD MACDONALD HAD A MADONNA

"you are a misogynist," she says;
"are there any women, over the age of twelve,
you haven't written nastily about?"

"yes," i say, "i have never written
anything uncomplimentary about farm women."

that takes the wind out of her sails.

"farm women?" she asks.
"farm women," i say;
"i have cast no aspersions upon
the integrity of farm women."

she shakes her head in speechlessness.

AN OPEN RELATIONSHIP

we have finally learned mutual trust.
well, if not "trust" exactly,
then at least an absence of jealousy,
a great diminishing of possessiveness.
oh i'm sure if she were spotted
checking into the sleepy-bye motel,
i'd still react,
as would she, if she came up on me
parked somewhere and found someone's head
between my legs.
but these things would have to force themselves
upon us. we no longer interrogate, investigate,
keep track, or look for clues.
it's just too bad that,
in order to achieve this peace,
we had to lose most of what we had.